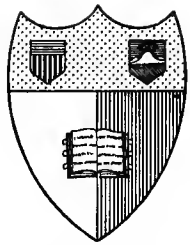
THE RACE OF THE SWIFT

EDWIN CARLILE LITSEY



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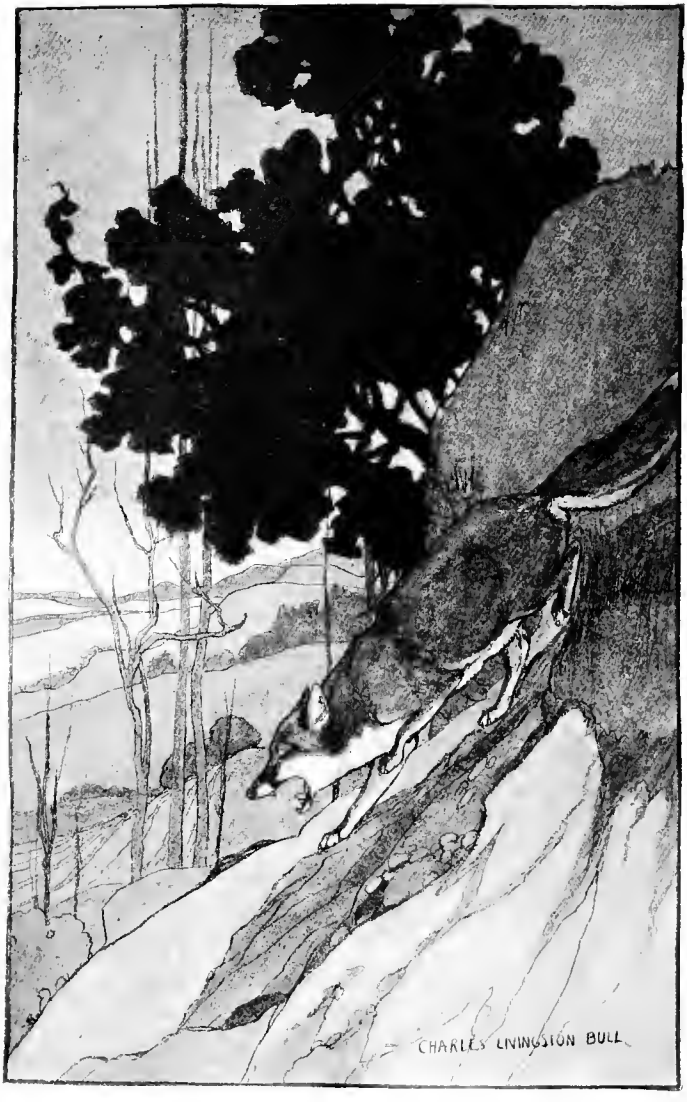

"The gray fox was leading bravely." *Frontispiece.* *See page* 16.

THE
RACE OF THE SWIFT

BY

EDWIN CARLILE LITSEY

AUTHOR OF "THE LOVE STORY OF ABNER STONE"

Illustrated from Drawings by

CHARLES LIVINGSTON BULL

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TO

CARRIE SELECMAN LITSEY

I INSCRIBE THESE STORIES

E. C. L.

THE author wishes to make public acknowledgment to *Leslie's Monthly Magazine* for permission to use in this volume "The Race of the Swift," "The King of the Northern Slope," and "The Ghost Coon." Thanks are also due *Field and Stream* for their courtesy in allowing the use of "The Fight on the Tree-Bridge." The other stories presented here have never appeared in print before.

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THE RACE OF THE SWIFT

A HALVED moon was shedding a faint glow over the rugged knob country. The twisted, broken, distorted ground, with its spasmodic growth of blackberry, sassafras, and juniper bushes, seemed the center of desolation. But something was living, moving, in the midst of this loneliness. Creeping along a ragged fence line at the base of a knob went a stealthy figure. Sharp-muzzled, keen-eyed, lean of body and wiry of limb, the object moved forward at a swift trot. The night was young. Scarcely had the salmon tints which the sun had left in the west disappeared. Through the pure, lambent air the rolling tones of the farmer could be

heard as he called his pigs home. Above the high hills gleamed the timid tapers of the early stars. A low breeze was chanting a gentle vesper among the pines and oaks upon the knob-side. A blundering rabbit butted blindly through the weeds on the creek bank; a bullfrog, fat and inert, bellowed forth his thunderous note; a muskrat splashed softly from a half-sunken log and spread his flat paddles to propel him to his hidden home. A whip-poor-will's heart-broken tones came from a point further down the hollow. Nature was saying that the day was gone.

The she-fox trotting by the worm-eaten fence stopped abruptly. The fence was curving around the knob, and this did not coincide with her purpose. She stopped with one fore foot upheld, and ears pricked attentively. The sounds she heard were familiar, legitimate; a part of her nightly

life. The she-fox was painfully attenuated. Her tawny body was barred with bulging ribs; there was a gaunt, starved look upon her bony face. The two rows of teats along her belly were clean and bare — even moist, for ten minutes ago a half dozen tiny tongues had striven vainly to draw nourishment from them. But she had none to give. For two days and nights she had tasted food but once, and during that time her hungry brood had insistently drawn her very life from her hour after hour. She had given it freely and without grudge, licking caressingly first one baby form and then another; had even borne unflinchingly the sharp nips from little teeth when the milk would not flow. The night before she had ranged for miles, though so weak that only the deathless strength of her mother-love sustained her in her quest. Not far from her home was

a place where human-people lived. But they were wary, and placed their hens and chickens under lock and key at the going down of every sun. Thither had she gone first, because it was the closest, but not a feather could she find. At the corner of the hen-house she stopped and sniffed eagerly. Beyond the white-washed planks were scores of fat fowls, and the she-fox knew it, but they were safe from her long, white teeth. She listened. The sound of rustling feathers and drowsy clucks smote her ears, and the saliva of famine dripped from the loose skin of her lower jaw. Emboldened by desperation, she walked around the building. At the bottom of the door a hole had been cut, so that the fowls could enter when the door was shut. But this was secured by a plank, which in turn was held in place by a heavy stone. She could not move it, because she was weak from

fasting. Thrusting her sharp, black nose into a crack about an inch wide between the planks, she drank in the ravishing odor of many a choice pullet. Suddenly realizing that this course was worse than futile, she turned, vaulted the fence enclosing the cow-lot, swerved around a prostrate, ponderous figure sleepily chewing its cud, and vanished in the direction of the stable. Here, likewise, her investigation was fruitless, so she gave up and turned her head towards another farm-house, five miles away.

The journey, which ordinarily would not have caused the least fatigue, came near to overcoming the dauntless forager. Near her destination she tottered to a brook and sank in the cool water, lapping it at intervals. This brought back some of her strength, and she essayed to complete her task. Through the orchard she trailed;

then suddenly her delicate nostrils conveyed to her subtle brain some welcome intelligence. Stopping about twenty feet from the yard fence, she reconnoitred. A big walnut tree grew close to the fence, and upon the limbs of this tree were some huge, shapeless knots; knots with convex backs and drooping tails; turkeys! The eyes of the starved raider glowed green and blue. Here was a feast. Strength for her, and life for her little ones back in their rocky den, crawling blindly about and wailing piteously for food. Softly as a moonbeam she crept forward, then came to a halt in dismay and sank upon her haunches. The plank with strips nailed across it, by the aid of which the turkeys gained their roost, had been removed and lay there upon the ground before her, to mock her baffled hopes and her bitter despair. With a keen sense of distances, she measured

with her eye the height of the lowest limb from the ground. It was not far; she had made greater leaps time and again. But now her leaden, paralyzed limbs could scarcely carry her pinched body over the ground. To make the effort would be suicide. The dog-pack were sleeping somewhere near by, and their sleep was light! A cracking twig would rouse them, and that night she could not lead them. There were babies at home who needed her; she dared not make the attempt. One of the knots on a limb moved cautiously, then toppled. The watcher sprang forward eagerly, to again meet with disappointment. The sleepy wings flapped once or twice, a new footing was secured, and the head of the restless turkey receded into the neck feathers as the fowl relapsed into slumber. After a few moments the dull red shadow on the ground moved on again,

hunger-mad, yet crafty. Into the confines of the yard crept the fox — up to a long, tall bench by the kitchen door. The scent of something strangely like fresh meat had reached her. There was a vessel of some sort covered with a piece of wood on the bench. To leap up and muzzle off the cover was the work of a second. And there was the dressed carcass of a chicken soaking overnight to serve as a breakfast for the human-people in the morning. Quickly as a star twinkles she of the forest-folk had the spoil in her strong jaws. Softly as a shadow falling she dropped to earth; swiftly as the wind she glided through the long corn rows growing in the garden back of the house, and was soon a mile away, safe, because unpursued. Then she sank upon her belly, and ate, and ate. Crunched the tender bones and the juicy flesh, impregnated as they were with

salt, and gradually she felt the glad elation of returning strength. Through her worn, famished body renewed life was running, although the edge of her hunger had barely been removed. She lay quiet for a while, gathering together the taxed forces of her being, and thinking of the miles stretching between her and the little ones. But before the shadows upon the hill-tops turned into the misty halos of morning, six tiny forms lay at their mother's breasts, well-fed and asleep.

Now another day had come and gone, and she was as bad off as before. Her mate, who had bided with her until the babies came, had tired of her and gone to seek a fairer wench, leaving her unaided to provide for the offsprings of their wild, free love. She had planned and worked, plotted and slain. The floor of the den was covered with feathers and sprinkled

with broken bones — dry bones which she had cracked in desperation while searching for sustenance. It was a fight all the time. Fight for food; fight to live. So when the night had barely come, and the salmon tints in the west were yet a shadow, the she-fox nosed her importunate progeny into a whining heap at one side of the den and slipped softly without and moved down the hill-side, her waving tail like a smouldering torch in the gloom of the woods.

Keeping in the shadow of the rickety rail fence till it could no longer serve her, she halted a moment for deliberation, then twisted her supple body and half leaped, half crawled through a crack near the bottom. As she had stood with ears alert before veering her course, the faintest kind of tone had come to her. It was different from the hill-voices. The forest-kind know all the dozens of low noises which float

along the knob-side at night. The voices and sounds are all soft — peculiarly soft. Only when a wild-cat is at bay, or the pack swings mouthing over the lowlands and the hills, is the wonderful silence of that region disturbed after the sun has gone. If her ear was not at fault — and privation had sharpened all of her faculties — the she-fox knew that a rich reward would soon be hers. Skirting the creek till she came to a place where it narrowed, she leaped across, and moved on in the same steady trot through the blackberry and sassafras bushes. Behind a low tangle of weeds and vines she crept at last, and crouched not three feet from a narrow hog-path winding on towards the farm-house half a mile away. From the pond at the base of the slight elevation over which the path led, some belated geese were ambling homeward. A half dozen or more; awkward,

matronly, placid, moving in Indian file with never a thought beyond dipping in the hog-trough in the barnyard, or gobbling up the food thrown to the chickens. The webbed feet plodded on — straight to death. One, two, three, four — six plump bodies marched sedately by the low clump of matted weeds. Destruction swift and sure seized the last. Out of the shadows sprang a shape; two sinewy forelegs glided around the long white neck and skilful fangs tore open the portals of death. It was done almost without a sound. A feather or two and a few drops of blood were the only traces of the deed. Taking the blood as it gushed from the gaping wounds, the fox seized the neck firmly at a point near the base, slung the heavy body across her back with a dexterous jerk of her head, and started for her den at a swift lope. That night she feasted to repletion,

and the next day she gorged herself on her kill. Made indolent by gluttony, she did not leave her lair for two whole days. Then her old enemy, hunger, returned again, and drove her to action.

During the days she had been lying inert in her rocky chamber, some things had happened which disturbed her not a little. The morning following the night she had brought in her prize, she had heard the dread voices of the hounds on some far-off range. All day, at intervals, the unwelcome chant had come to her ears, and so she knew that the human-people had missed their goose, and were abroad with the pack in quest of its destroyer. The second day a more alarming thing had happened. It was when the shadows of the taller trees began to lengthen towards the east, and twilight reigned in her cave home, that she was roused once more by

the determined notes of the pursuing pack. Creeping to the entrance, she presently saw the chase passing along the knob-side. A great gray fox, nearly spent, was gliding, falling down the incline, his red mouth stretched for breath, and his bushy tail drooping. After him raced the hated friends of the human-people, loud-tongued and tireless. The gray fox was leading bravely, and hunters and hunted passed from view to the accompaniment of rustling leaves and snapping twigs and triumphant bays.

The next morning, near midday, her merciless offsprings teased and worried her so that the she-fox crept forth in spite of the warning of the day before, and set her sharp muzzle towards the crest of the range, with the intention of invading territory which hitherto her feet had never pressed. There were wild turkeys back in

the hills, and wary and suspicious as she knew them to be, they were no match for her wily woodcraft. But scarcely had her noiseless feet gone over the top of the knob, when a sharp yelp immediately behind her caused her to jump and turn quickly. They were there — her enemies — and their noses were smelling out her trail, for as yet they had not seen her. Even as she leaped for the nearest cover like a yellow flash, her first thought was of the little ones biding at home. She must lead her foes away from that cleft in the rocks where her love-children lay awaiting her return. And though her life should be given up, yet would she die alone, and far away, before she would sacrifice her young.

It was a hard and stubborn race which she ran for the next six hours. At times her loyal, loving heart seemed ready to

burst from the strain she thrust upon it. At times fleet feet were pattering almost at her heels, and pitiless jaws were held wide to grasp her; then again only the echo of the stubborn cry of her pursuers reached her. She had doubled time and again. Once a brief respite was granted her when she dashed up a slanting tree-trunk which, in falling, had lodged in the branches of another tree. Eight tawny forms dashed hotly, furiously by, then she descended and took the back track. Only for a moment, however, were the cunning dogs deceived. They discovered the artifice almost as soon as it was perpetrated, and came harking back themselves with redoubled zeal. So the long hours of the afternoon wore away. Not a moment that was free from effort; not an instant that death did not hover over the mother fox, awaiting the least misstep to descend.

Back and forth, around and across, and still the subtlety of the fox eluded the haste and fury of the hounds. All were tired to the point of exhaustion, but none would give up. The sun went down; tremulous shadows, like curtains hung, were draped among the trees. The timid stars came out again and the halfed moon arose, a little larger than the night before. And still, with inveterate hate on the one side, and the undying strength of despair on the other, the grim chase swept through the night. At last the blood-rimmed eyes of the reeling quarry saw familiar landmarks. Unconsciously, in her blind efforts, she had come to the neighborhood of her den. Perhaps the love within her heart had guided her back. She found her strength quickly failing, and with a realization of this her scheming brain awoke as from a trance, and drove her to deeper guile. Two rods

away was the creek. To it she staggered, splashed through the low water for a dozen yards, and hid herself beneath the gnarled roots of a tree from the base of which the stream had eaten away the soil. She listened intensely. She heard the pack lose the scent, search half-heartedly for a few minutes, for they, too, were weary to dropping, then withdraw one at a time, beaten. But for half an hour the brave animal lay against the tree roots, waiting and resting. Then she came out cautiously, looked around her, and with difficulty gained the mouth of her den. Casting one keen glance over her shoulder through the checkered spaces of the forest, she glided softly within, and lying down, curled her tired body protectingly around her sleeping little ones.

THE ROBBER BARON

THE ROBBER BARON

THE Robber Baron sat upon his throne — for he was also a king. No courtiers attended him; no pages hung upon his slightest gesture. In dignified solitude he sat, and watched, and watched, and watched.

Part of the country through which Green River runs is almost as it was when the Master left it with the seal of completeness. Its topography is unchanged except for the natural changes brought about by the primeval elements of wind and water. There are vast stretches of timbered country checkered with cultivated acres, and rugged limestone cliffs fringed with moss and garlanded with poison ivy. The home of the Robber Baron

was on the edge of one of these timbered tracts, in an old oak tree. This was his castle, and his alone. None of his feathered cousins dared perch in the spreading branches, even to rest for a moment. That tree was the property of the Baron, and he had proven his title to complete ownership more than once with beak and claws and beating wings. At the very top of the tree a dead snag shot up a distance of ten or twelve feet. This was the turret of the castle — the watch-tower. On its summit the old hen-hawk would perch, and complacently view his wide domain and his trembling subjects. And he was indeed a king. He levied tribute from the air, the earth, and the water alike, and whenever he poised and swooped, a life went out. One sound only caused his warrior heart to quake, and that was the solemn voice of the great horned owl, cry-

ing dismally in the night from the recesses of the wood. Here was a foe worthy of his steel; bigger, stronger, and bulldog-like in his battles. But the hawk took care not to pit his prowess against the power of this night marauder. During the day he was safe, for his one enemy who could wage successful warfare with him moped on a limb from sunrise till after dusk. In the darkness he sat high and safe, for the night-bird hunted low. More than once the Baron, sleeping the sleep of the gorged glutton, had awakened to the sound of mighty wings winnowing the air, and he would draw his fierce head a little further down between his wing-shoulders, shuddering and afraid. And if the night was moonlit, and he happened to look down, he would see a broad, black shadow gliding swiftly between the trees—a veritable spectre of death.

Day after day the Robber Baron sat on the top of the snag in the oak tree. This was his home, his bed, his point of lookout, and his banquet chamber. With almost telescopic keenness of vision, he could see what was going on for incredible distances around him. A rabbit's quiet movements while feeding a half mile away on the young clover in a brown stubble field; the neutral tints of the prim little quail as they scurried over the saffron leaves and through the yellow grass; a squirrel's bark back in the forest behind him; a leaping fish in the stream which ran a good mile from his gray snag — all this he saw and heard, as well as many other things. If he had recently dined and was well filled and comfortable, he would ruffle his wings, preen his breast feathers, and gaze calmly upon the things which were his. When he wanted them he would go and get them,

and when once those needle-pointed talons touched fur, feathers, or fins, they never let go their hold until they reached the snag. Then one foot would seek the familiar grasp, while the other held the victim down rigidly until the rending beak of the spoiler had torn out the life of his prize.

Now years of rapine and plunder and slaughter had not only schooled the Robber Baron in the fine art of taking game of every description, but it had made him an epicure as well. For, sailing over a barnyard one day, he saw a plump pullet dozing in the warm dust by the side of a stone wall. The instinct imparted by some daintily fed ancestor awoke, and hardly knowing it, the hawk swooped and clutched. There was a terrible outcry from the stricken pullet, and the barnyard tribe joined in the row with one voice. The pullet was fat and heavy and

struggled desperately, but the sinewy pinions of the attacker had never failed him, and he slowly arose, with labored flapping, taking his captive with him. But the hubbub had reached indoors, where the farmer and his sons were taking their noonday meal, and to them the fuss outside meant "Hawk! Hawk!" and nothing else, for hens never cackle at any other time as they do when a hawk or a mink invades their midst. So a boy rushed out with a gun, and there, barely clearing the tops of the trees in the orchard, flew the raider. The boy fired twice, but when he ducked his head to gaze under the smoke, the hawk was still going, and with him the pullet. The shot had whistled about the ears of the Baron, and a hot streak had run up his back and across his neck, but no shot struck him fairly, and he went grimly on. When he at last sighted his tower his

strength was giving down, for his burden was heavy and the way had been long. But he went up, up, bravely up, breasting the clear air higher and higher, and finally his feet rested on the old familiar place, and he skilfully balanced himself with his wings.

As he feasted, he realized that he had made a great discovery. The tender, juicy flesh which entered his greedy mouth in tempting strips was far more suited to his palate than was the meat of the wild things upon which he had hitherto preyed. All of the wild flesh was tainted, more or less, with the exception of the luscious quail, but here was something fit for even his kingly beak. So as he ate, he planned, and his thoughts boded ill for the farm housewife.

Thus it happened that for a time a feeling of peace and security reigned in the

dominion of the king. In the rabbit world the cotton-tails came more and more into the open, venturing out from the brier patches and the low-growing bushes which were their natural protectors; but they never failed to watch the air with one eye while they ate, for the destroyer came silently, and the first warning was the fatal shadow falling upon them, followed by the smothering swish of wings. Then woe to the long-eared luckless one who was even a few feet from cover. The descent of the bold robber was like a lightning bolt — as swift and as deadly. The quail began to trot with more confidence between the stubble-rows — for it was the autumn season — and to hunt for berries and stray grains of wheat with less fear. So with all the different families over which the Robber Baron held sway. Every day a broad, thin shadow would pass over, but it never

dropped, and the timid ground-people whispered to each other that their dreaded enemy had found a new hunting-place, and rejoiced accordingly. At times they saw him returning, nearly always flying low and heavily, with a cumbersome prey in his clutches. What it was, they did not know, but so long as he left them in peace they were content not to question his doings.

One golden afternoon the Robber Baron sat upon his turret in majestic loneliness. He was a royal bird. His head was flat; his brow niched and frowning, and his beak was curved like a boat-hook. His mighty wings were folded closely to his sides; his gray-white breast, flecked with brown, bravely met the winds which blew about his towering snag. His sturdy legs were tufted to the second joint, and his scaly talons, black and steel-like in their

powerful grasp, curved firmly around the dead wood which formed his perch. He was a type of strength and grace, and the embodiment of rapacity and cruelty. Calmly and proudly his bold eyes roamed far and wide, resting for a moment upon a waving, irregular line of sedge, caused by the passage of some four-footed thing; then being drawn to the glinting breast of the river, where some constantly widening circles showed the upward leap of a frolicsome fish. But no heed at all did he pay to these signs, which upon other days would have lured him to pursuit. His aristocratic taste would no longer admit of such petty sacrifices and such poor food. Were not the feathers of a plump hen even at that moment littering the ground at the foot of his castle, and had he not heard, the night before, a prowling raccoon crunching the bones which he had disdainfully cast aside?

The air was crisp with the tang of wild leaves which the frost had bitten, and hazy with the Indian summer glory of the season. Back in the forest behind him some maples were blazing in their crimson garments, and the hardier leaves of the oak and chestnut were tingeing. A creeper, encircling with many a close embrace the trunk of his own high tree, burned like the fiery serpent of some magician. Emboldened by the truce which their lord had declared, the Bob Whites sent their inexpressibly pure notes from different points like the sounds of answering bells. In the corn-field just across the river some men were working. With long knives in their hands they attacked the serried ranks of yellow-uniformed soldiery, and wherever they went they left a gap. Round pumpkins, which the Midas hand of frost had turned to purest gold, were being carried by

others to one huge pile, forming a pyramid of plenty from the bountiful Giver. In a hickory tree near his castle two old crows were engaged in a very silly dispute, and the Baron turned a disgusted gaze upon the quarrelsome black things, who knew nothing of dignity, and all of sly theft. Far overhead a buzzard sailed along — that dumb, faithful scavenger of the wild, who was never known to utter a sound from the beginning of time. Him the big hawk respected. He attended to his affairs, and never engaged in bickerings with his neighbors. That he nested on the ground — in the caves and in the hollows of rotten tree-trunks — was no concern of the Baron, who scorned the earth, and never touched it but to rise again immediately.

The sun was slowly dipping towards a line of hills far to the west. The watcher on the snag took note of this, as he did of

everything that went on around him, and he knew that if he was to have a feast that day he must go about procuring it. The barnyard which had been supplying him with his daily meal for the past ten days was not far away, but the wily robber had become used to many things during his predatory existence, and one of these things was that every house possessed a gun, and that a gun has a remarkably long range when loaded for hawk. During his last raid he had lost some feathers, and there was a constant, itching pain in one of his thighs, where a shot had lodged. He had tried to pluck it out with his murderous beak, but his efforts had only aggravated the wound, with the result that he was continually irritated. He would visit that barnyard no more. Sweeping his bold eyes in another direction, he beheld, several miles away, a wavering column of

smoke ascending. This came from the chimney of a farm-house. He made his resolve quickly. The memory of countless repasts forbade the idea of even a day's fast. The clamped toes unclasped, clasped, and unclasped again; the graceful body leaned forward, and the wing feathers quivered. Squatting low, the big bird launched himself in air and the broad wings shot out and bore him up. Once again he was in the element he loved.

The tiny hearts of the ground-people shook with fear as the shadow of the destroyer passed over the stubble-field, for weeks of immunity from attack had not lessened their fear of their bloodthirsty ruler. But the shadow passed on and disappeared; the river's placid breast mirrored his image as the great hawk sped on, flying leisurely, for he would need his strength upon his return. Then over the

corn-field, where the men were husking the yellow grain. Just over the variegated floor which the tree-tops of another forest made he passed on his flight, for there was no reason to mount high, and thus tire himself. Very soon the farm-house came in sight, and in the big yard was a grove of locust trees. These afforded an excellent shelter from which to spy, and presently his feet gripped a limb, he tilted forward from the momentum of his flight, but regained his equilibrium instantly, and his searching eyes turned this way and that in quest of a victim. About the yard some matronly hens were straying, with here and there a strutting cock, self-conscious and pompous. The daring robber did not hesitate long. A particularly tempting Plymouth Rock hen drew his eye, and instantly he left his perch, arose in the air, and prepared to swoop. Just as he closed

his wings for this purpose, a babel of twittering arose which he had learned to dread, and around the corner of the house sped two martens with fluttering wings and wild cries of anger. Dismayed, the marauder spread his wings again and strove to escape, while a fearful tumult began among the fowls in the yard, followed by a wild rush for cover. Swift of wing and fearless, the tiny attackers vigorously pursued the fleeing hawk, hovering over him with their shrill cries, and now and again dropping upon his back to deliver a sharp peck. When they had chased the invader from the yard they considered their duty done, and came back in wild curves to their box on the pole in the rear of the house.

Enraged and smarting from the chastisement which he had received, the hawk sailed up in a white ash tree to rest and

consider the situation. As he debated dusk came on, and he became aware that he was desperately hungry. The yard was guarded, and he could not enter there. Disappointed and sore, he was preparing to depart empty-handed, when his restless eye caught sight of a dark spot moving over the ground not far away. It was a foraging hen coming home to roost. Five seconds later his pinions hissed over the head of the doomed fowl, the knife-like talons caught and held, and he painfully arose to begin his homeward flight. His prey was a full-grown hen and was heavy as lead, but when he arose with his spoil he never let go his hold. So over the tops of the trees he went again, the limp body in his grip brushing some of the leaves, so heavily did it sag. Back over the corn-field, forsaken now by the harvesters, and his flight was so low that a man with a

club might have struck him. Then the river, in which the first stars were beginning to gleam. How his legs ached, and each motion of his wings wrenched his body. He had never been so late returning before, and the distance had never seemed so long. On the other side of the stubble-field rose his tower, waiting for him to come home, as it had waited through all his life. Would he ever reach it? He would if it cost him his life, for he could not sit on the earth and eat, like a filth-devouring buzzard. His dragging flight over the field was more than half completed, when he heard a sound that turned his blood to ice. It was the deep, solemn note of the horned owl, boomed forth at the edge of the wood. He had tarried too long at his hunting, and his enemy was coming on his night-hunt for food.

Swiftly the hawk dipped and swerved,

"Zigzagging nimbly, he strove to elude his pursuer." *Page* 41.

but those big red-green eyes, to which darkness was day, beheld him, and gave chase. The wily robber dropped his burden, hoping to bribe the spectre in his wake. But with a rush the owl passed over the cast-off carcass, and sped on. The hen-hawk heard the soft, feathery wing-swish coming nearer and nearer, and though he was no coward he knew that his hour was at hand, for he was worn and spent, whereas his foe had fresh strength. Zigzagging nimbly, he strove in this manner to elude his pursuer. But the big owl had waited long for this chance, and he was resolved that it should not escape him. Suddenly he struck out with beak and claws, and the hawk careened wildly from the shock, then righting himself, turned to give battle — it was the last resort. And so they clashed and clashed again. There arose the rasping of beak on beak and the

dull thud of flesh propelled against flesh. Feathers were torn out by clawfuls, and the breast of each combatant was streaked and dabbled with blood. At last the owl, maddened and all-powerful in his might, beat and smothered his antagonist to the earth, and holding that kingly head on the ground with the vise-like grip of one foot, with his curved beak he prodded and tore till life was gone from the Robber Baron.

The gray old snag which was his tower waited for his coming that night in vain.

THE GHOST COON

THE GHOST COON

SOMETHING white was moving warily through the shadows of Beech Hollow. It was near the turning of night, and the heart of the wide, uncleared knob area was quiet. Not the quiet of sleep, indeed, for the wood-folk were abroad in numbers, each bent upon a separate errand whose aim and end was death. But they moved without noise, from the largest to the smallest. A brown mink wriggled his serpentine way along the erratic path which a field-mouse had made; following him, perchance, with subtle cunning and fell purpose, was a wild-cat. A fox sniffed where a pheasant had passed, and trailed hungrily and swiftly for a dozen yards, to a point where the bird had

risen in the air. So through the night they went, big and little, threading the secret ways of the underbrush, and sooner or later finding that for which they sought. Few went beyond the limits which marked Beech Hollow on every side. The lore of the wood-kind taught that this place was haunted by the ghost of a big coon, and that death awaited the invader into his precincts. By a secret telegraphic code, by purrings and by barks, there was not a denizen of the wild but knew the fact. More than one had seen the spectre. It was not the hallucination of a March-crazed cotton-tail. The ghost coon ran every night from the first cock-crow till near dawn, and his hunting ground was held inviolate by his four-footed flesh-and-blood kindred.

It was an opulent night in autumn. The half-naked beeches which gave the

hollow its name shivered in their scant covering. The hillsides were heavy with drifted leaves, russet and gold and poppy-veined. Through the hollow purled a small stream, sleepily. Along the trunk of a long-dead beech, prostrate and blackened, moved something white, a figure almost ball-shaped. Its head was held low to the surface of the log; its body rose up in a peculiarly rounded hump, and its snow-white, bushy tail trailed along behind. It was the ghost coon of Beech Hollow on his nightly quest for food. His progress was most ungainly. The fore feet would move forward a few inches and the body would lengthen. Then the hind feet would get in motion and the back would assume an arc, and all the time the busy nose would be smelling to left and right. Reaching the end of the tree at last the coon reared upon his

haunches, squirrel fashion, and gazed about him keenly. Nothing was stirring beyond a fluttering leaf; nothing was heard but the low soughing of the wind. Suddenly the triangular head went up a little higher, and the nose pointed directly across the hollow. Thus it was held rigidly for several moments, while the beady eyes glowed fiercely. Then a slender red tongue curved swiftly around his upper lip; he sank to the log again, and thence to the ground, and moved down the hillside with a shambling, awkward, yet incredibly swift gait.

That very day, as he was sleeping in his hollow tree at the end of the ravine, he had been awakened by the shots of some hunters in the corn-field bordering his valley of refuge. Then he had stretched himself and gone to sleep again, confident of a rich banquet in the hours of the com-

ing night. He knew well — for he had learned the lesson when half grown — that frightened birds always take to the nearest cover when annoyed too much by men and dogs. Not long after sundown he had crawled out of his hole and crouched on the limb in front of it, and listened to the rallying call of the quail as they gathered together to squat for the night. Then, when the night was far enough advanced, he had slid down the tree like a patch of moonlight, and gone in search of his prey.

In a direct line with the coon's progress, the stream below spread into a pool of considerable breadth and some depth, and as the soft-footed prowler gained its edge he stopped, leaned over the water, and eyed the surface intently. A born fisherman, he could not let the opportunity pass to land one of the small perch which had their home in this pool. For a number of

minutes he stood as still as one of the stones lining the bank. Then he burst into action with the agility of one of the cat tribe. One claw-rimmed foot shot forward and downward, then up again all at one stroke, and the star rays glittered on a scaly body flying through the air. The fish had scarcely touched the ground when the nimble animal was beside it. Quickly the faithful paws pounced upon the flopping object and pinioned it to the earth. Then just back of the neck the sharp fangs crunched, and the ghostly ruler of the hollow ate leisurely of the toothsome dainty which his craft and skill had provided, spitting and clawing out the bones when in his greediness they stuck in his tongue. When his supper was over, the coon, his hunger appeased in a measure, did not at once take up the air-trail which was still wafted gently to him from the top of the other

slope. He moved around and around the heap of bones and offal which marked his late repast, sniffing and nibbling by turns. Finally he veered about and started back over the track which he had come. Just then his nostrils were tickled by another light gust, laden with the partridge smell. It was too much to resist. He swerved again, and began to climb the slope of his temptation.

Nestling at the base of a rugged knob not two miles distant from Beech Hollow was a log-roller's hut. Of its human inmates we have no word to say, for our story has naught to do with them. But of a certain low, heavy-bodied, vengeful, mongrel cur dog which harbored at this hut in the day, it becomes necessary now to speak. This dog feared nothing — absolutely nothing. He would bite at the thick sole of the shoe which kicked him;

he would fight anything that walked upon two feet or four. He was totally wicked, totally merciless in his battles, and he cherished an inveterate hatred for coons. Throughout the day he would hang around the miserable shelter of the human-people — his companions, but not his masters — and when night sank down over the broad wastes of forest and hill he would go trailing through the dense passes of the wild, sharp-nosed and vigilant; his stub tail moving like the pendulum of a clock, and keeping time to his rapid footsteps. Once in his wanderings he had entered Beech Hollow, and had run upon that which the wood-folk feared. A large, white, ghostly figure coming towards him down the ravine. The cur yelped and fled. Gaining the open to the south of the hollow, the moonlight gave him courage, and he warily circled the place, coming in at

the other end and running with his keen nose not an inch above the ground. He stumbled upon the scent quickly, and the chase-yelp bubbled to his throat. But he choked it back, for he was wiser than most coon dogs, who give tongue as soon as the trail is caught, and thus warn their quarry of danger. The trail that night led him to the base of a large beech tree, and there was the coon smell on the bark as high as he could reach by standing upon his hind legs. From that night the hollow held no terror for him. A coon had but one smell, and though this one was white, whereas all with whom he had drawn blood were gray with black-ringed tails, still it was a coon, and the one idea in his head now was to harass and harry it into open fight.

So he began to stalk the lonely hollow which was shunned by the forest-people, inbred guile driving him to all the cunning

artifices known to the wood-dwellers. But the ghost coon was his match in subtlety. Never since that first night had the vindictive cur laid eyes upon the phantom, though two and three times a week he would come with his fangs whetted for fight. But upon that night in autumn when the coon feasted upon the fish, and subsequently started in quest of the huddled quail, a dark, noiseless shape entered the hollow from the north, and glided down it as a cloud shadow glides over a field. The cur struck the trail a few feet from the point where the coon had dropped from the prostrate tree, and instantly he crouched and grew rigid. The odor was fresh and strong, and he had waited long and travelled far for this chance. Flattening his body on the damp leaves, he looked about him with glowing eyes. Nothing was to be seen or heard. Which way was

he to go? Had his prey gone up hill or down? Guided by that unerring instinct which all animals possess, the dog arose after an instant's hesitation and moved down the hill with his black muzzle brushing the leaves.

At the top of the other slope the white marauder was slowly closing in upon his sleeping victims. Each step was taken with painful deliberateness and extreme care, for he knew that his journey would end in a clump of huckleberry bushes just at the edge of the wood. Onward he glided, his tiny feet as noiseless in their progress as the fall of a snowflake. Beneath a bending, berry-laden spray he stopped, and gazed gloatingly for a second upon a dozen or more brown bodies crowded together with their tails touching. Then he pounced. A few sleepy chirrups, a wild scramble, and the sound of

whirring wings followed. The chagrined coon, cheated of his anticipated meal, shook a few downy feathers from the claws of his right fore foot, backed out of the bushes, and took the return trail for his tree of refuge. In his anger at failing in his last adventure, he neglected to scan the slope before him as he started down it. Soon he realized that a strange stump had taken root in his path since he had trodden it a few moments before. A squat, black, ugly thing, which he had not previously noticed. He came on stubbornly, however, and did not stop until he saw two blazing eyes looking at him with an expression of fiendish joy. There was nothing to do but fight.

For a very perceptible time the two glared at each other. The dog cruel, mean, wicked ; the coon angry, furtive, sly. Then low sounds came from the throat of

each. The dog gave a deep, muttering growl; the coon a succession of sharp hisses, not unlike those made by a goose, the while he withdrew into himself and glanced about as if meditating flight, though no tree grew near enough for him to reach. The dog quickly assumed the offensive, for his eager hate would not countenance delay. His spring was like the rebound of a cross-bow, but his enemy knew how to fight. While the cur was yet in air the ghost of the hollow had reared and fallen prone upon his back, his hind feet drawn close down upon his belly, and his fore feet arched and ready. At the right moment the hind feet shot up, and ripped a half dozen streaming seams in the flanks of the cur as he descended with snapping jaws. A screech, a scuffle, a howl of pain, and the dog leaped backward, drew his tongue rapidly across the

stinging rents in his side, and bounded for the second time upon his foe. Aiming at the throat, his teeth found the loose skin at one side of the neck instead; the coon secured one of the stub ears of the attacker in his mouth, and thus they grappled. Strange sounds floated through the length of Beech Hollow that night; sounds which never before had disturbed its accustomed quiet. There were the sounds of heavy bodies threshing the earth, the rasping snarl, the yelp of distress, and the clashing of teeth. In the still night the noise carried far, and the keen ears of some wood-dwellers running on a near-by range heard it, and the forest-folk stopped, listened, and turned their faces from it, for it came from the haunted hollow.

On the leaf-strewn slope one great ball of intermingled black and white gradually drew near the bottom of the hill. Neither

knew nor thought of the course the fight was taking. Their hearts were inflamed with the battle-lust, and with lightning-like movements they fought for the death-hold. After a time the level was reached, and here, by mere chance, the jaws of the dog found the throat of his enemy. The coon realized his strait, and plied all four feet with such good effect that the blood ran in streams from the ragged wounds which he inflicted. But his breath was shut off, and nothing can live or fight without air. It was then that he felt something cool clasp his hind leg. With his remaining strength he threw himself backward, dragging the cur with him, and the water of the pool closed over them both.

A coon can remain under water for a marvelously long time. A dog knows it, and will never attack them in or near a stream. The ghost coon sank, taking his

enemy with him. In the foreign element the cur, confused, strangled, and frightened, loosed his hold, came to the surface and struck out for the shore. But the tables had turned, and the valiant old boar knew it. Rising also, he received the grateful rush of air into his strained lungs, and in another moment he was on the back of his opponent and forcing him under. Fastening his teeth in the loose folds of skin at the base of the skull he sank again, dragging the cur down with him. The water boiled like a caldron, and though a leg, or even a shoulder at times appeared, no head came into view. Soon the pool grew quiet. Then, near the bank, a sharp muzzle came up, slowly followed by the dripping form of the victor. His den-tree stood quite near the other end of the hollow, and as he painfully began his march towards it, leaving a trail of water and

blood behind him as he went, his body swayed and his steps were uncertain. At last he stood among the roots which he knew so well, and with eyes which scarcely saw, looked up the bare trunk which he had been wont to climb with perfect ease. Feebly he reared, and began the ascent. Six feet from the ground he stopped, gently let his head fall forward upon the bark, quivered from end to end, and dropped to the earth, dead.

THE SPOILER OF THE FOLDS

THE SPOILER OF THE FOLDS

HIGH over the crest of Bald Knob the storm clouds had gathered. A dull, uncertain, ghostly light lay upon the land, for the moon was at its full, though hidden by the driving wrack. Directly in the mouth of Devil's Gorge, where it debouched upon the low-lying pastures of the hill-farmers, a gaunt figure was standing. It was neither fox, nor wild-cat, nor dog, for it was bigger than any of these. In the fantastic shadows which the wild night cast the figure seemed monstrous, grisly. Its eyes burned with a basilisk glare; its head was broad, with a long, tapering muzzle; its shoulders were strong, and its lean legs stood firmly upon the earth. Moment by moment the storm

grew fiercer. It rushed among the great trees on the knob-side, and tore the leaves hissing from the tossing branches. A blinding flash of lightning corkscrewed the gloom, followed by a terrible peal of thunder. Immediately there was a crash from far up the slope. An oak tree had fallen before the wind. The figure standing in the mouth of Devil's Gorge crouched as under a blow, turned its head and glared in the direction of the sound, then glided out into the open with lowered muzzle and drooping tail.

The gray wolf knew his mind and his business well. Depending largely on guile for success in his hunting, yet there were times when wit and fleetness were of no avail, and his great strength alone had won him through. His ribbed sides bore many a scar, black and hairless, where a dog's tooth had furrowed its way through his

hide. So, with added craft on account of his many battles, he had come to skulk more, holding meat won by stealth equally as good as that fought for, and realizing as he grew older that in time he would be overcome. This was new territory he was treading now; a virgin field wherein he hoped to find rich harvest. Nor was disappointment in store for him.

Guided by that precious instinct which is the eternal heritage of all the wood-kind, the spectre-like shape moved briskly across some gullied foot-hills, climbing, slipping, leaping, and crept through a brush-fence just as the lowering clouds opened, and the rain began to pour in driving torrents. As the water beat upon his back and plastered the hair to his lean sides, the old forager began to move faster and with less desire for concealment, for well he knew that human beings would not dare thrust their

noses out on such a night. It was all his own, and he could work his will unhampered. Through coarse clumps of wire-grass and stray patches of clover he went, casting his sharp eyes neither to right nor left, for he was fully aware that his gentle prey would never wander around in an open field on such a night as this. Near a corner in the farther end of the pasture rose a great black bulk; when the lightning flashed the gray wolf could see it, and something white at its base besides. It was a straw rick, the result of last year's wheat harvest, and it afforded some protection from the wrath of the elements. Towards this the marauder went, relentlessly, steadily. Some two rods from it he stopped, crouched, and waited. Presently a vivid glare lit up the drenched landscape, and there, huddling in the lee of the rick, was a flock of sheep, crowded together and

shivering from the wet. Dense darkness followed the lightning's flash, and under its cover the robber drew nearer, nearer, nearer. Now, through the gloom and the sheets of rain he could make out the cowering forms — for they had already scented danger, though powerless to resist it. Closer yet crept the shape of death, his empty stomach dragging the ground so low had his body sunk. The sheep pressed with short, jerky movements against their straw shelter, wild-eyed, helpless. They felt the danger, but did not know how to combat it. Then the climax came, as swiftly as a bolt from the sky. A dim shape was projected through the night; there was a bleat choked short off and a wild scurry of feet flying blindly from danger. One ewe alone remained, prostrate upon the ground, while at her soft throat keen fangs tore, and a curved red tongue lapped up the warm

blood as it flowed. The gray wolf was skilled in strategy. He knew that when a sheep-dog turned traitor and began to harry the flocks, he never went beyond the throats of his victims, and took only one a night. So the killer lay and drank the rich life-current as it came; drank until even his ravenous hunger was appeased. Then gnawing tentatively at the draggled wound he had made, he arose and turned his besmeared visage towards the dark line of knobs which was his hiding-place and his home. A short time later, when the summer storm was dying away in the east and the thunder was but a growling echo, a gaunt figure entered the mouth of Devil's Gorge and became engulfed in the black shadows which hung over it.

Five hours later the sun came up into a sky of purest blue. With it arose the hill-farmers, strong from their long night's rest

for the day of toil. One there was who mounted his piebald saddle mare, with a bucket balanced on his saddle-bow, and went to salt his sheep. At the bars one was missing; an unusual thing. He called and called again, the cry which had never failed to bring her before. But there was no answer. Then the farmer urged his horse forward and began the search. Around the field he went, and at last drew up at the straw rick. There lay the lost one, dead. He dismounted and made an examination. Her throat was wofully mangled and torn, but there was no other hurt upon her. "A sheep-dog's gone wrong!" was the man's audible comment, as he arose and mounted his horse again to summon his fellow-farmers.

They came to the scene of the slaughter, one and all, for sheep-raising was their most paying industry, and sheep-murder

was a crime to which there was attached one penalty and one only — death. The ewe lay as the killer had left her, limbs straight and stiffened, head back, and that awful, damning wound in her white throat. One by one they came and looked, those rugged, gnarled, horny-handed hill-men. One by one they shook their heads. "A sheep-dog done it," was the one remark; "an' be he mine, I 'll kill 'im myself!" Then arose the question, how to detect the culprit? Each dog had followed his master and each was called up and examined, but nothing was proven. Every mouth was clean and fresh; there were no clots of wool nor blood-stained noses. And each man breathed a sigh of relief when his favorite was exonerated, for "Love me, love my dog" is never more exemplified than in the sheep-raising districts, where, with almost human intelligence, the four-

footed retainers care for the flocks entrusted to their care. The meeting was preparing to break up when some one discovered a track in the rain-soaked ground. It was fully four inches across, and the claw to each toe was plainly marked. It was useless to fit a dog's foot to that colossal track. Some strange animal had assaulted the flock, and there was not a heart but beat easier when they found this out. For a farmer to kill his dog required a sacrifice almost as great as that which Abraham made when he prepared to offer up Isaac.

So, amid wild conjectures and impossible theories, the farmers dispersed. That very night another flock was visited and one taken from it. The raider left no clue. He came, slew one sheep and drained its blood, then went his way and the darkness hid him. The farmers met again and held

council. It must be a dog, they said, for it killed like a dog. Anything else would do away with half a dozen sheep, or more. But the meeting resulted in nothing, because there was nothing to do except keep a sharp lookout. The next night the same thing happened, and the next, and the next, and so on for a week. Always a different flock, but always one sheep was claimed, one only. Then it was the farmers took to sitting up of nights and gathering their flocks under shelter. This invisible scourge bade fair to devastate their folds, and strenuous action must needs be taken. That first night of watching one went to sleep at his post along towards morning, and when the call of a neighboring cock awakened him at sunrise, it was to find one of his yearlings dead not ten feet from him. The destroyer had crept in while he slept and laughed at the

loaded gun across his knees, while proceeding to feast on the choicest of his flock. Then alarm changed to terror. What was this dreadful thing which came at night and which left no trace behind? No one could answer, and the deeper the mystery grew, the more the farmers quaked and wondered.

But later, upon a night when the moon was waning, another had seen a huge gray object gliding towards the lot in which his sheep were corralled. Then haste got the better of judgment, and the man fired before the marauder got within good range. The result was only a handful of coarse drab hair found upon the ground the next morning. Then hounds were brought and put upon the trail. They followed it, mouthing, to the entrance of Devil's Gorge, and there lost the scent on the boulders and the pebbly soil. But this

gave a clue to the men. Their enemy dwelt somewhere within the gloomy recesses of that mighty cleft in the hills. So thither they came, night by night, and watched the entrance of that dismal place. But when they returned, unsuccessful, to their homes in the morning, it was to discover that one of their unguarded flocks had been entered, and a member of it lifeless. So dismay seized them, for it seemed that they were helpless before the subtlety of this mysterious assassin. Their nicest plans were frustrated, and their schemes brought to naught.

Then traps were laid, cunning devices of wood, and pitfalls, screened with leaves and dry limbs. Sometimes these were found sprung, sometimes unmolested, but sprung or set, they never claimed a prey. Whatever it was that worried their sheep seemed proof against all their wiles. Still

the nightly visits continued, and dead mutton lay everywhere, and the buzzards darkened the sky in their circling flight. It was as though a plague had come upon the land. Driven to desperation, the farmers took their guns and fell to patrolling the dark ravines, especially Devil's Gorge, whither it was surely known the destroyer had at one time gone. They found nothing, though day by day they went in numbers and scoured the defiles of the knobs. That for which they sought remained in hiding, and came forth only when the generous mantle of night covered his movements.

Among the many who had suffered from the nocturnal prowler's depredations was one of sterner mould than his fellows. A tall, bony-faced, austere man, who talked little and thought much. And his thinking led him to this. When, in the cease-

less round of slaying, three of his sheep had been taken, he mounted his horse one day without a word to any one, and rode into town. When he came back after nightfall, he brought with him a huge steel trap, big enough to hold a bear. The next morning he arose while the stars were yet shining, whistled his dog, and started on foot to Devil's Gorge, taking the trap with him. The dog went in advance and after him the man, struggling through the damp hollow with his heavy burden over his shoulder. Day dawned on the peaks above them, and filtered faintly down into the depths through which they toiled. Suddenly the dog came rushing back to his master, his bushy tail between his legs and his whole body a-quiver from fright. The man quickened his pace and pushed forward grimly, drawing a large revolver from his pocket at the same time. Rounding a

bend in the gorge, he came upon that which had sent the shepherd dog cowering back. Perched upon a large boulder was a monstrous wolf, gray and grim in the half light. Raising his arm the man fired, but the wolf leaped just before the flash and ran in the other direction. The man followed as quickly as he could, and presently saw the big form disappear in a hole up the sloping side of the cliff. The entrance of this den was worn as by the constant passing of feet, and the man felt that he had found the home of his enemy. So he set his trap, right under the lip of the crevice, cunningly hiding it with dead leaves and the rubbish of the woods, and securing the strong chain to the trunk of a dwarfed black oak. The first step the monster took on his next raid would make him a prisoner; the steel gyves would hold him fast until his foes came and killed him.

In the dead of night, when the moon had climbed the towering peak of Bald Knob, and the hill-farmers below kept silent watch for the coming of the raider, a face appeared in the cleft on the side of Devil's Gorge. There was the craft of a lifetime in the burning eyes as they suspiciously swept the ground immediately in front of his den. There was nothing to awaken distrust except the tumbled condition of the earth, but the old wolf hesitated. Then hunger, the one law which the wood-folk know not how to disobey, drove him out. He rested one foot gingerly upon a bed of leaves, leant a little more weight to it as he prepared to draw the other one forward, and just then two bands of steel arose up out of the ground and gripped him nearly to the knee. With a deep howl of wrath and terror the old warrior fought for his freedom. Around and

around he tore, gnashing with impotent teeth at that awful thing which held him like a vise. For the space of an hour he wrenched and struggled, then suddenly realizing the futility of his efforts, he crouched upon his belly to rest. It was near morning when he accepted the last resort, and began the heroic task of freeing himself.

Before sunup, the man who had set the trap came with exultation on his face, confident of victory. He found the trampled ground, the sprung trap, and fastened in it the fore foot of a large wolf with part of the leg, which had been gnawed in two just below the knee. The spoiler of the folds had baffled them to the end, but the flocks were never more disturbed.

THE FIGHT ON THE TREE-BRIDGE

THE FIGHT ON THE TREE-BRIDGE

THE forest lay black in the close embrace of the odorous young night. Soft, balsamic waves of air rose strata above strata, stealing between roughly corrugated boles and smooth trunks, and the satin-soft stems of the young saplings who had yet to win their spurs as knights of the wood against the mighty winds; permeating every dell and dingle, every copse and tangled covert. The nostrils which these air-waves touched tingled with delight, and the lungs which were bathed and invigorated by this life-giving essence from nature's laboratory expanded with a conscious strength, and sent

the red blood bounding from them on its ceaseless errand. The season was early summer. Beneath the interlacing boughs it was black — black as the night of Egypt's curse. A solid bank of gloom which bore no outline and no shape. So might it have been just before God uttered his first command to things terrestrial. Here and there a tree arose above its army of fellows, and the delicate tracery of spreading branch, and even of tapering leaf, was etched upon the vastness overhead. In the sky the faithful stars were burning. Not the smallest speck of cloud veiled their earnest faces, and the mellow radiance which their united power shed fell like a blessing upon the glad earth. But the forest baffled the star rays — those gentle messengers which came so timidly upon their missions of light. The leaves at the tops of the trees gleamed glossy and

green, but they were a numberless multitude of shields to the solitude below.

The forest went off to the gullied hills in one direction; in another it sloped sharply down a bluff to the river, with an accompaniment of running briers and rotting, lichen-covered stumps and an occasional fallen warrior of the wood which some storm had overcome. The river was not wide — a half-grown rabbit might have swum it with ease had the water been stagnant — but here it ran swift and deep between its high, rock-bound banks. It flowed silently, though, except for a low purling where a drift had formed and a sucking gurgle where a ledge let down the bed.

This river was a source of much worry and concern to the wood-people. All of them could swim, some well and some very badly, but more than one family

circle had been bereft by reason of the treacherous stream, for in addition to the velocity with which it wound its way through the wood, shifting whirlpools lurked within it, against which the strongest swimmer's power was as naught. There was a second forest across the river, not as large as the first, it is true, but still wide enough to shelter many a tiny dweller, as well as give him food. So when friend wanted to visit friend, or cousin to call upon cousin, there was this black, whispering barrier stretching between, mocking them with its insinuating murmurs, and seeking to lure them to its faithless and fatal bosom with low cooings and shining, siren arms. And on certain moonlit nights in spring there had been those who heard the mating call wafted through the stillness. Coming in answer, they had suddenly found themselves stand-

ing on the brink of that taunting river, while from the other shore the cry would come again, tender and appealing. Then hot blood and the madness of the season would have their way, and the young buck, belong to what family he may, would put discretion behind him and glide out into the stream with the echo of his mistress' call as a beacon and a guide. On rare occasions one would make the passage safely. More often, as he battled with the current, snaky fingers would shoot up from beneath and grip him, whirl him around and around in maddening circles, and finally drag him down with a hiss of victory, and his lifeless carcass might have been seen afloat the next day, miles away.

All this was before the great storm. After that had come and gone things were different with the forest-people.

THE FIGHT ON THE TREE-BRIDGE

It was at the close of a day in mid-summer. For weeks there had been no rain. Day after day the sun had come up, had scorched and burned and seared, and had gone down. The leaves curled upon the trees; the grass blades became brittle; the rabbit runs were so hot at midday that they hurt the pads of the cottontails, and they lay panting in their burrows, waiting for night. Then it was that the wood-people blessed the river, for there was no water anywhere else. The river sank foot by foot, leaving cracked, baked stretches of yellow clay as it receded. Still it ran doggedly, and breathed defiance. It would take more than one dry summer to rob it of its terror and strength. At last there came a day which was born with portents of some awful thing to come. The sun rose hazy, like a ball of blood. The air, which had been hot, became

stifling. It pressed on the chest and burned in the throat. The chipmunks and the squirrels sought their nests wildly; the birds went deeper into the forest. By noon all of the little people who had a home were in it. But so far nothing had happened. Mid-afternoon a growl of wrath came from the west, and a long, leaden band pushed its edge over the horizon. A terrible silence hung over the forest; the unnatural calm which precedes some great calamity. Then a chill breath stirred the upper leaves, followed by gusts of wind almost icy. Night came long before its time, and the sky which for weeks had been a shining surface of blinding light became a seething, tossing caldron of billowy clouds and murky vapors, and threading through all the tumbled mass was a vivid network of flame. The chariots of the storm came thundering down the slopes of

the sky, and the forest shivered, and bent, and tossed its thousands of arms in agony. Thick limbs were rent from writhing, groaning bodies, and cast furiously down. Some veteran giants, weakened by the natural decay of years, mingled their death-cry with the hoarse bellow of the destroying wind and fell crashing and quivering to the earth. Then came rain, and a cessation of the demoniac fury.

It was a night which the wood-dwellers never forgot. Birds were killed by the dozens, and the lives of many of the four-footed kind were given up as well. The secret trails were obliterated and blocked, and the runways of the weasel and the rabbit became a trackless wilderness.

Long before the sun arose the next morning, an old raccoon cautiously poked his black nose out of a hole in a maple tree, near the first fork. This raccoon was

the oldest and the wiliest of the wood-folk that lived in the forest. An old boar coon was he, and many years had passed over his wise little head. Once before, in his youth, such a storm as this had swept over the forest. His mother had him out teaching him how to stalk ground sparrows, and the storm came so suddenly that they had no time to reach home, so had taken shelter under a shelving rock on the bluff by the river. He had weathered that storm successfully, and in later years had paid scant heed to nature's bursts of anger. A raccoon, of all things, was surely smart enough to keep out of the way of a falling limb. The whiskers about the muzzle of the old coon were gray; his eyes were black and beady, and some wonderment was expressed in them as he rolled them around on the once familiar scene. He had not slept the night before, for his

house had shook and creaked its warnings hour after hour, and the hungry voice of the wind had howled down at him from the hole above his head. Everything was changed outside. A neighbor tree lay prostrate at the foot of his own; a broken limb sagged at the side of his door, and everywhere was disorder and destruction. A trifle dazed by it all in spite of his superior wisdom, the old fellow slid back into his den and fell to crunching the bones of a chicken he had captured two nights before.

Though the storm had hopelessly tangled the secret ways which had been nosed out and trodden with so much care, and had been the death of many of their kind, yet it had brought its blessing, too, in that it had conquered for the people of the wild their enemy, the river. It was in this way.

At a certain point on the southern bank

of the river an old elm tree grew, quite near the edge of the water. The bank had crumbled and the tree had leaned, until at length its top hung almost over the center of the stream. Nothing but its great roots twined about hidden rocks kept it from falling. Directly across from the elm, close to the shore on the other bank, an ancient sycamore had stood, leaning very slightly towards the river. Now when the storm came down from the north the sycamore's roots gave way and it swayed and fell, its top, by some strange freak, lodging in the fork of the elm, and the force of its fall wedged it in firmly and snugly. And behold ! here was a bridge for the feet of the wood-folk, and they could pass high and dry and laugh down at their baffled foe.

There was but one passageway for the many members of the many tribes, and naturally trouble arose sometimes, and

there were nights when the river smiled placidly and opened its arms and waited. Sometimes one victim came; sometimes two, for the bridge became the scene of many a midnight tragedy and moonlighted fray, and in the end it was the river which was the victor, after all. It did not have to seek its prey. It simply waited, and took its tribute very much as of old, though in a different manner.

So the years went by. Mates were chosen; families were born; battles were fought. The strong devoured the weak, much as the human folks do in another way. The old raccoon still lived in his maple. Though others of his kind often harbored by threes, fours, or even sixes in a single tree, this aristocrat was not sociable, and preferred a hermit existence except once a year, when the sap of spring renewed his youth and sent him a-court-

ing. Then a sleek, mild-eyed little mate would come and keep house for him until the children were old enough to hear a dog running half a mile away. Then quite abruptly, upon the return of mother and offspring some day, they would be met by a white-fanged visage and ordered to go elsewhere for a bed.

The forest was the abode of little people. Nothing larger than the raccoon found a home there. He was practically lord of the demesne, partly because of his age and sagacity, partly because of his might as a warrior. His record was three dogs whipped in single fight. He did not fear any dog so long as the men did not come poking around with their blinding lanterns and their guns. And it might be told, further, that when he set foot upon one end of the tree-bridge, he usually went to the other end.

In a field at the edge of the smaller forest was a negro cabin, where lived the black people with a horde of tattered children and two dogs. One was a shepherd; gentle, calm-eyed, intelligent. The other was a coon-dog; little, muscular, aggressive. A coon-dog is as distinctive a breed as is the collie or the spaniel. It is true he is an ignoble mixture of many, but it takes the certain and correct blending of various strains to make a coon-dog. He must have the nose of a pointer, the speed of a greyhound, the strength of a mastiff, and the stubbornness of a bull-dog. The model coon-dog is low, short, and heavy-set; his back and sides are nearly black, and his throat, belly, and feet are a reddish brown. Such was the dog which hung about the negro cabin till hunger sent him nosing along the floor of the forest. He had trailed coons long enough to know

that they never touch earth in the day, and that the scent is freshest in the early part of the night, just after a light rain. So that night in spring when the soft, balsamic odors rose strata above strata, the coon-dog, impelled by the pain in his stomach, which was like a hundred tearing claws, set off at a smart trot through the sassafras bushes and the dewberry vines, heading for the smaller forest on the southern side of the river. His keen nostrils revealed a trail before he had gone a dozen yards in the wood, and with a low whine he followed it with amazing swiftness and accuracy. In and out it led, and the smell which the traitor feet had left grew stronger. Almost the dog gave tongue, so close he knew his quarry must be, when he stopped, confused, with his fore feet resting on the slanting trunk of a tree. He had come to the bridge of the for-

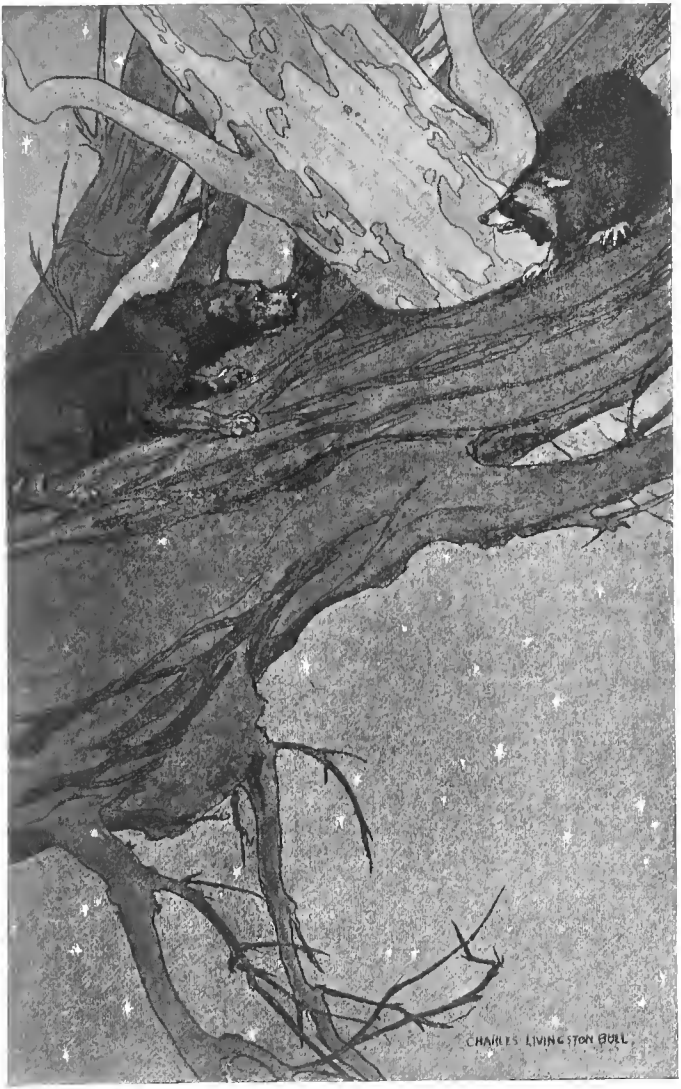
est-people, and the hot trail led up the incline before him. Off in the shadows near to one side something called — a sharp, barking cry. The dog cocked his ears and jerked his head around, but quickly decided that he had nothing to do with whatever it was that had temporarily engaged his attention, and again turned to the bridge, restless and eager. He had never attempted its passage, but its surface was broad and the bark rough, and hunger is a stern master. Quickly he squatted and leaped, thrust out his claws so that they caught and held, and in another moment he was creeping warily up the tree with the scent still warm beneath his guiding nostrils.

But other ears had heard that low mating call which the dog had ignored. The old boar coon of the maple tree, driven by loneliness and the magic of the season, was

ambling in his humpbacked, awkward way along a narrow path curving down the bluff on the northern side of the river, bent on securing a bride for perhaps the twentieth time. He stopped and listened alertly at the Circe-sound, then moved swiftly towards the tree-bridge to respond in person. With remarkable agility for his years he gained a footing on the sycamore trunk, showing his teeth with a low growl of displeasure as the strong odor of opossum told him that one had just passed that way. A few feet further on his ears detected a scratching sound on the other end of the bridge. Some impudent cousin had dared to risk his anger — for was not this his bridge when he chose to set his royal foot upon it? He would make him give way and retreat, or cast him off, for he had done the like before. On up the ghostly white trunk of the fallen sycamore

he glided, his fur rising in wrath as the scratching beyond grew louder and louder and came closer and closer. Gaining the apex of the bridge first, the raccoon thrust his black muzzle over the fork where the two trees touched, and not five feet away came the coon-dog, timorously but steadily. The ring-tailed warrior did not attempt to choke the fierce snarl which rasped between his white fangs. What was this upon his bridge! A four-footed thing which disgraced his shape by living with and serving the human-people — a dog!

The intruder stopped, sank on his belly, and gave back a savage growl — his gage of battle. Below the river dimpled in the starlight and murmured joyfully along the shores. Carefully the dog inched forward, his mouth open, his upper lip curled back. The coon waited, his beady eyes watching



"What was this upon his bridge!" *Page* 102.

the play of every muscle in the form of his antagonist, and the curving claws on all four feet shot out to their fullest length. These were his main defence; his teeth were secondary. Both animals were at a disadvantage. The dog was out of his element, and his footing was very precarious. On the other hand the coon, while perfectly at home, never waged his battles in a tree. When he fought it was lying flat on his back on the ground. But the guile of many years was in his sly old brain, and where the trees locked was a little hollow safely bulwarked by the peculiar way in which the branches had entwined. As the dog leaped at his throat he threw himself on his back and struck out with all four feet at once. But the starved alien knew his business well. Ignoring the stinging rents which the hind claws made, he bore the fore legs down with the force of his

fall, and his jaws gained the coveted hold without which no coon can be conquered. But that was not all the battle. Fiercely the old boar wrestled, ripping the body of his foe with lightning-like movements of his strong legs, gnashing his teeth in a vain effort to use them, and struggling for breath. The dog bore his awful punishment like a martyr, lying as closely as he could so as to impede the other's movements, but never uttering a cry of pain and wrenching and tugging at the furry throat over which his jaws had closed. In the intensity of their joint efforts neither had a thought of caution. Presently the raccoon was out of the hollow where he had lain to receive the attack; there was a slip, a scuffle, and through twenty feet of space two writhing bodies, locked so closely as to seem almost one, fell with a loud splash into the liquid depths below. And so the

river received them both, and a whirlpool sucked them down.

Now the bark on the tree-bridge is almost worn away from the constant passing of little feet, which before had been afraid.

THE GUARDIAN OF THE FLOCK

THE GUARDIAN OF THE FLOCK

IN a ravine where men seldom placed their feet, a rod or more up a rocky, bushy hillside, in a hole almost concealed by an overhanging dewberry bush, lay a dog. A big dog. His head, huge, disfigured, terrible, rested upon the earth between his paws, and the lids had fallen over the fierce eyes, which glowed with changing lights when open. The big dog was asleep. His back-bone was a succession of knots, with small depressions between. It terminated in a tawny stump, perhaps six inches long, which stood for a tail. The bones above his hips jutted out like door-knobs; his flanks were sunk in cavernously, and palpitated with each

sharply indrawn breath. There were scars on the ribbed body; old scars which had healed bare and blackly; others where the aggrieved flesh was beginning to join, and still others which showed raw and red — almost dripping, and about these tiny gnats had gathered and sat in rows at their feast, while their colorless bodies quickly took on a crimson shade. A large green fly boomed into the hole in the hill, zigzagged about over the recumbent form, and then plumped his spiked feet down in one of the rawest of the wounds. A convulsive shiver passed over the side of the dog and the green fly lost his foothold; but, not to be cheated out of his meal, he returned more cautiously, and, standing among the scant, scrubby hair at the edge of the moist fissure he stretched out his neck and thrust out his tongue. The muscles along the bruised side moved again, but more slightly,

and the fly and the gnats ate and drank their fill.

The dog's high shoulder-blades seemed ready to burst through their covering; there was a deep hollow between them. The neck was short, thick, bull-like. One ear was bleeding — the other was gone, and a tangled mass of gnarled flesh marked where it had been. About the grim muzzle were some patches of sheep wool, draggled and red.

The dog had been out nearly all night, and it was now early morning. He had travelled many miles since the sun had set the day before; ranging back and forth, skulking, hiding, waiting. Before he returned to his hiding-place he had battened on blood and fought a battle.

The dog had no name, no lineage, no friends, no home. He was simply the dog. He bore within him the strains of a badly

mixed ancestry, and had been hated and cuffed since puppyhood. Hanging to the outskirts of a straying gypsy band, he had come to the neighborhood where he now abode. A farmer whose flocks were beginning to multiply swiftly saw the uncouth, bony frame and the defiant face, and thought that here was a fitting guardian for his ewes and lambs. He bought him for a fifty-cent piece and set him to watch over his sheep. But there came a night when the farmer's allowance of food did not satisfy him; when the hard bread and cold stuff flung to him only whetted his appetite. That night he trotted to his post with guile in his heart. But hour after hour he held himself in check, though at times almost rubbing shoulders with his fleece-covered charges. It was past the turning of night, and his stomach was empty, and hurting him. The master was

asleep; the night was so still; he was hungry, hungry, and had never known a law! All around him sleeping patches of white dotted the grass. He was lying down, too, but his red-green eyes were wide, for he was the guardian of the flock. There is a point that marks the limit of endurance. Directly the dog arose, swiftly, silently, stood rigid for the briefest space of time, then launched himself at the soft throat of a half-grown lamb. A stifled bleat; a struggle which ended with its inception, and the traitor lay upon his belly and lapped the warm blood and worried at the tender neck of his victim. That was the first. When the farmer came out before sunup the next morning, he found the mangled bodies of five of his lambs that had been born that spring, and he whom he had placed to watch over them gone.

In this way was the dog accursed and outlawed, and the heart of every person and thing was set against him.

He, for his part, fostered hate by day and wreaked it by night. Every step he took was fraught with danger. Men were against him, and men's dogs were against him. He soon learned that the men carried long sticks that spat flame, and at one time when the fire jumped out, and the stick was pointed towards him, he felt a sharp pain in the fleshy part of his thigh, and blood ran down his leg. Then he grew more cautious, and ventured out only at night, when he had to smell and feel his way. He could baffle the men in the night, and his own blood-kind were a little slow in chasing him. But they had fallen upon him once unexpectedly, and he was a sorry sight when he at last broke from them and escaped to cover. His wounds

upon that occasion were long in healing, for there is venom in a dog fang. He was sick for many days, and ate nothing but certain herbs which instinct told him would counteract the poison in his system. He grew well after a long period of pain and weakness, and upon his next raid he came too near the house and had one of his ears shot off by a farmer's boy. That night he crept back without his spoil, staggering up the ravine with a red trail behind him. He scratched away the dirt on one side of his den, and laid his wounded head on the cool, black earth. This made the blood to clot, and to finally stop running, but the dog was so weak that he lay over on his side, catching his breath in jerks. Thereafter he fasted many days, because of his spent strength, but at last he essayed to crawl to the back of his hole and feebly excavate some provender which he had hidden

against this very day a fortnight ago. When he had eaten, new energy began to diffuse itself through his worn body, and once more he grew well, but more ugly than ever, and in his heart was nothing but vindictive hate, and treachery, and craft. He was an outcast, hunted by every living thing that was big enough to harass and kill. He had skulked and run all his life. Now things would change. He would turn hunter, and harry and slay until they made an end of him.

The big green fly, forgetting caution in his hungry zeal, probed his lance-like tongue a little too deep in the sensitive flesh. The dog awoke and snapped viciously at his tormentor, but the pop-eyes of the fly saw the movement, and he escaped the cavernous jaws projected towards him. The dog fell to licking his new wounds. Between the hours of twelve and four of the past

night he had sallied forth, and found the flock in a pen near the barn, unguarded, as he thought. To bring one down was play. He gorged himself on the blood and was turning to another victim, when a form larger than his own leaped at his throat from the shadows. The dog wheeled, and the fangs of the attacker closed in his side. For a while they wrestled silently, save for deep-throated snarls. Then of a sudden the dog broke away, leaped from the pen, and ran. The wolf-hound attempted to follow, but his feet slipped on the blood-soaked ground as he made his jump, his breast struck the top rail of the pen and he fell back, and did not make the effort again. The dog sought his den, resentful, sore, desperate. That night he slept from weariness; in the early morning the green fly woke him. In his round, ugly, disfigured head was born the thought that he

would turn hunter now, and wreak vengeance on his persecutors.

Throughout the day he lay still and rested, licking his sores at intervals, and dozing from time to time. When the black night came he arose, stretched himself and yawned hugely, shook his big body vigorously and stalked forth with the fell intent in his heart to kill — kill — kill!

With his keen nostrils set to catch every odor the breeze might bring; his one macerated ear cocked for the slightest sound, he trotted down the ravine and soon emerged into the open country. He had come to know the neighborhood well. Who sat up late; who kept close watch; who slumbered careless of his stock. Past houses where lights burned in the windows, making detours to avoid possible detection, crouching low on his haunches when he heard footsteps, — the

dog pursued his way through the night. Mile after mile, over fences and ditches, through the corn, along the roadside when it ran parallel with his purpose. At last he passed the boundary which had marked all of his wanderings heretofore, and as he entered this unexplored territory he moved more freely and with less caution. His trained muzzle scented a familiar smell. Through a rail fence he dragged himself, scratching his torn side cruelly on a splinter as he did so, then started down a hillslope briskly. Soon he found them, alone, sleeping, helpless. One by one he pulled them down. As each fell, the survivors would huddle closer together, dazed and afraid. First the lambs, then the ewes, then the bucks. The blood-lust grew in the dog's savage heart with each fresh massacre. The first four had sated his appetite and filled his maw to repletion, but his

mission was to kill without mercy. His strong jaws snapped out their lives one by one, and the bell-wether went last. He was old, and had seen killers at work before. He had always kept well in the background until the bloodthirsty invader had got his fill, and gone away. To-night he had stayed on the further side of the flock, expecting the killer to leave after each victim. But he did not leave, and kept drawing nearer to him instead. The end of it was that the bell-wether ran, but there was something that ran faster than his shadow — something that pounced heavily upon his back — and then it was all over; the butchery was done.

Back over the path which he had come went the murderer. His chops were gory, his shoulders and fore legs were bloody, his whole body was streaked and splashed with the telltale red. But he did not care.

Everything was against him, he was against everything. There would be no backsliding nor capitulation until death closed the scene. Back over the path which he had come he went — a fearful figure, big, deformed with wounds, drunken with blood. He held to the highway now so long as it did not run out of his course, for he was possessed of a reckless bravery which took into account neither friend nor foe. It was the still hour of the night. The hour when life ebbs lowest in the hearts of those who sleep; the hour just before the roosters smell the coming day and awake to give the alarm. He met nothing, nothing opposed him. Just when the darkness began to quiver before the bare hint of encroaching light the dog felt, rather than saw, some object moving awkwardly in the road before him. It was not large, and lay close to earth. The pads of his feet bore him

noiselessly forward. The terrible jaws opened, snapped, the head was flung contemptuously to one side, there was a thud, and a dead opossum lay in a patch of huckleberry bushes by the old rock fence. In a hollow tree in the woods, not far away, some little opossums lay piled upon each other, asleep. The mother's supply of milk had run low, and she had started in quest of food. The youngsters would sleep until hunger wakened them, and then life's tragedy would soon be over.

The dog quickened his pace, because daylight abroad meant death for him. Through the dim first-light of the coming day he ran, easily. It is true he had covered many miles that night, but his stomach was full of the rich, hot life-blood he had drained from palpitating throats, and new strength had been imparted to him. Misty cobwebs hung about his head

like a veil, gathered from his passage through the bushes and underbrush. His tongue lolled, dripping, from his deadly jaws. In this way he came to the ravine just as the gray dawn was beginning to be silvered by the rising sun.

Across the hollow from his den, on the opposite slope, where some hickorynut trees were growing, a silent figure stood with a gun in its hands. A half-grown boy had come out after squirrels, knowing that the bushy-tailed, active little creatures sought their breakfast just before sunup, when the air was fresh and moist from the night dews. He had stood still for a long time, as one must who hunts squirrels, and presently his eyes were drawn by something moving on the opposite side of the hollow. He looked and saw a large, dark-brown shape disappear, as it were, into the earth. The boy rubbed his eyes and

looked again, and then he discovered the orifice under the dewberry bush. He had found the hiding-place of the scourge! A squirrel barked in a tree not ten feet away, and scampered about on a limb in plain view. The boy did not shoot. He tucked the gun under his arm instead and walked on his toes for a quarter of a mile, then he broke into a run, and arrived at home breathless a few minutes later.

The dog, with a full stomach and a contented mind, was sleeping. He had lain down with his wounded side next to earth, so that the flies could not annoy him. But into his dreams of slaughter and feasting crept some disturbing force. Something insistent, alarming, if intangible and vague. So strong was it that the dog grudgingly opened his eyes a tiny slit, and almost at the same time his ear cocked up, the end of it hanging limply, because it

had been bitten through at some former encounter. The eyes opened wider, and rolled craftily towards the mouth of the lair. A second more, and the big, round head was raised quickly. There was a sudden stiffening throughout the strong, rugged frame, and the dog arose to his feet and stole forward. He crouched low, and peered out expectantly. Directly beneath him was a mixed crowd of men and dogs. All of the men carried those sticks which he had learned to dread; they were all looking towards his refuge, and some were pointing. It had come at last. He had tarried too long at his killing, and somehow the daylight had betrayed him. But not a tremor of fear passed over the dog. He merely sank to the earth, and watched.

A succession of sharp clicks came to his ear; the men swung their sticks forward and started up the slope in a body,

calling the dogs with them. About half way up the hill they halted. One picked up a stone and flung it towards the hole in the hill. One of the dogs detached himself from the others and sped after it. He was a coon-dog, small and venturesome. He poked his head under the dewberry bush inquisitively. The sunlight outside was still in his eyes, and he thrust part of his body in, too, catching a scent which warranted investigation. The move was fatal. Like a bolt of lightning some curved fangs tore his throat open, and without a sound and with scarcely a struggle the coon-dog rolled back down the slope, dead at the feet of his master. Above, the dog licked his chops, and waited. The men tried to urge the wolf-hound forward, but he slunk back, afraid. Among those of his own blood-kind who had come forth to take the outcast was a half-breed — part bull, part

mastiff. He was a powerful fellow, and sullen looking. His owner took him by the collar and led him up the hill a few feet, then spoke to him and pointed towards the hole. The half-breed seemed to understand, for his hackles rose bristling, and he advanced slowly and warily. Just in front of the overhanging bush he stopped, thrust his head forward, and stood as a setter stands when he holds a flock of birds. The dog inside arose, and made ready for the attack. It came speedily. Without sound or warning the half-breed leaped, and they closed. The dog had sprung forward to meet his foe, and in the fearful struggle that ensued they both appeared on the hillside, full in the open. Urged on by the voices of the men the other dogs closed in too, and the tawny shape of the outcast became the centre of a whirling vortex of animal fury. Down the slope they all

rolled together, the men cheering on their allies, and trying to find an opportunity to use their weapons. Down, down to the little stream that ran through the ravine the battle went, the half-breed never losing the throat-hold which he took at the first leap. There, on the bank of the rivulet, the tragedy was played.

The men said they had never seen such a fight.

THE KING OF THE NORTHERN SLOPE

THE KING OF THE NORTHERN SLOPE

ALONG a path which a man's eye could not have seen, but which, even at night, was visible to the kind that dwell in the hills, a long, lithe object passed swiftly and without noise. It was down a knob-slope, in a diagonal course, the object came, and the night was only star-bright, for the moon was late in coming. This quiet figure, which glided serpent-like on its way, was about three feet in length; its slender, round body was covered with short, thick hair, drab and mottled brown in color, and had only a stump of a tail about three inches long. The head was bullet-round, the short,

stubby ears pricked and alert, and the nose muscles distended and twitched with every cautious step. The padded feet of this night rambler were almost as noiseless as the star rays' fall. Scarcely a leaf was overturned, scarcely a dead twig snapped. His body, curving sinuously, would not have brushed an ant from the stem of a sapling. The King of the Northern Slope was hungry, and his present errand was to the sheepfold or pigsty of the nearest farmer.

He was the biggest wild-cat in that part of the country, and his reign on the northern slope was respected and acknowledged by all the four-footed things that harbored and hunted in the hills. The mountains far eastward had dwindled away here to a chain of knobs, bisecting the country from east to west. Miniature mountains they were, indeed; wooded, rocky, untillable,

and lonely. Wild-cats, foxes, and the smaller gentry of the forest, squirrels, raccoons, and opossums, lived and throve upon this chain of knobs. But gradually those that had lived on the northern slope went over the crest to the other side, and left the field to the undisputed possession of the big cat, who did not care to have his preserves poached upon by the rag-tags and bob-tails of creation. Once a year he would go questing for a mate, boldly invading the southern side of the range, and not coming back until he had found the lady of his choice. Then after a while a brood of whelps would be born in the secret lair of the King, and when these were scarcely able to fall about the floor of their birthplace in play, and bite at each other's sawed-off tails, the King would, one fine day, hustle them and their mother, his erstwhile bride, out of his home and over

the crest of the range, to fare good or ill, as luck would send. At least this was the story that the human-people told, and this much goes to support the tale, that, whereas those farmers living beyond the line of knobs to the southward lost but few hogs from nocturnal depredations, those living to the north were in nightly fear that morning would show a trail of blood from barnyard or pen. And the men-people had sat together night after night in council, with heads bobbing and tongues wagging, trying to evolve a plan whereby to capture or destroy this scourge of their fields and pastures. But they had failed. The truest nosed hounds of the various packs scattered around could not keep his trail, but would lose the scent and return crest-fallen and shame-faced. He was never seen within gunshot, and they could not find his lair. But one thing

they knew — that nothing else ran at night on the northern slope.

Picking his way as daintily as a satin-shod miss tips across a dirty street from carriage door to house door, the King pursued his diagonal course, which would eventually bring him to a field adjoining the garden of a farm-house. He had but little more than half completed his journey, when to his quick ears came a sharp snap, and something struck him sharply on the back just behind his shoulders. He bared his teeth with a low growl of wrath, and smote back blindly with one paw, which was rimmed with five curving claws unsheathed with lightning swiftness. At the same time there came the sound of huge wings beating the air to bear a heavy body up, and a hoot owl laboriously made his way through the trees, his perch, a dead limb, having at last broken beneath his

weight. Low on the ground two fiery eyes glared up in savage hate; then the long, white claws slowly drew back out of sight and the cushioned feet moved on again.

It had been a hard and long winter for the King, and the spring had been slow in coming. There had been days when he could not leave his den; when the leaden clouds had unburdened themselves for hours at a time, and the snow had piled up, up, up over the very door of his home, and all familiar landmarks were obliterated. Then he must needs chafe inside his hiding-place, and when hunger seized him the cold nipped him the harder, and it was a bitter battle to keep them both off. But his fur had grown heavy and thick, and he could curl up and sleep and forget that hunger was gnawing within him. He had lived through too many winters and seen

too many snows to venture out. For tracks can be seen by the men-people, and then it would be all over with him, for they would come and smoke him out. Once before, when he was younger, his life had been thus jeopardized, and it was only by finding another exit far off from the one where his enemies sat waiting that he escaped. The winter just passed had seen his endurance tested to the utmost. Tortured by starvation, he had at last determined to scout around on the top of the knob, when the half-covered entrance to his den was darkened and a striped-tail raccoon came ambling in. One swift blow and then the King feasted royally, although his victim was old and bony and had but little blood in his carcass. But this stayed his craving maw for a few days longer, and then he crunched the dry bones and licked the snow in lieu of water and

waited for a thaw. It came at last, and the prisoned King sat just within his door and watched the snow disappear with gloating eyes. But even then there was danger in every step he took, for the soaked ground caught and held the scent of his tracks, and there were ever roaming the hills in search of him those lop-eared, thin-flanked, tireless hounds, the only four-footed things in all his kingdom that he feared. And they never came alone to do him fair battle, but always in overpowering numbers with hereditary hate in their hearts. And so it was incumbent upon him to employ flight and wily woodcraft when dealing with these arch-enemies, and such had been his cunning that he had always fooled them and shaken them from his tracks ere he crept tired, yet victorious, into his hidden chamber to rest.

The phantom-like figure trailing its way

down the knob-slope reached the timber-line without let or hindrance save the single exception which we have seen. His back was still beset by occasional sharp pains where the limb had struck, and this fact did not heighten the quality of mercy in his heart, if, indeed, such a thing abode there. He halted for a moment on the edge of the cleared ground before trusting himself to the open, and looked and listened with painful intentness; then a slender red tongue leaped from his mouth and swept his chops hungrily, for a peculiar odor was wafted to his nostrils across the field — it came from the backs of a bunch of sleeping shotes in a far-off corner of the barnyard. Discretion immediately gave place to the unsatisfied hunger of many days and the insatiable lust for blood. With swift bounds the King advanced across the field, which had been sown in

wheat the fall before, and was now totally bare of vegetation. He reached the rail fence enclosing the garden and skirted it warily, every nerve keyed to its highest tension, for not a hundred feet away were the pack, sleeping the light dog-sleep under and about the house of their master, and they had been taught from puppyhood — nay, for generations even — to rouse and give chase at the wild-cat smell. The King knew this, but he had dared the same thing before, and carried off a prize while the guardians of the flock slept. The mottled shape moved on with soundless steps, and in the shadow of the barn it stopped. But it was only to glance about to see that everything was still, and that none of his blood-enemies had scented him in their slumbers. Again he moved forward — to stop rigidly. A fat fowl was roosting on the top of a stake

in the fence-corner three feet from him. This was more delicate than hog meat, but there was less of it, and the marauder was half starved — he felt that he could have eaten a full-grown ox, and then slept peacefully. So the big rooster dreamed on, not knowing how narrowly he had escaped, and the sly cat resumed his creeping journey. His trained and faultless nostrils had already located the exact whereabouts of his prey, and in a few moments he was as close as he dared to go before the final move.

The fence was high and the rails were placed too closely for even his sleek body to squeeze through a crack. He could see the half-grown shotes in the corner, sleeping huddled together. They were very still. At times one would flick an ear; another would give a spasmodic kick at some tormenting flea, and a third would "Ugh! Ugh!" drowsily, and relapse into

unconsciousness. It was easy game for an old hunter — and how juicy their sides looked in the starlight! But the King had hoped for a crack through which to crawl. True, it would be no effort for him to scale the highest fence ever built, but top rails have a way of falling off with a terrible clatter, and sometimes, if the spoil be very heavy, it is not such an easy matter to get back over the fence to freedom. In the midst of his cogitations a light wind sprang up, and he noted with dismay that it blew from him to the house yard — to the keen nostrils of the dog-pack. Indecision vanished. With eyes glowing like sulphurous coals he crouched low, and swiftly inched his hind feet and haunches up under his belly. But the semi-darkness deceived him, and he miscalculated the distance. The spring was too strong, and he clutched wildly at the

"The King stopped long enough to throw back his head and give one terrifying scream of victory." *Page* 143.

top rail as he passed over, only to drag it crashing from its place. With a quickness found only in the tribe to which he belonged, the great cat touched the ground only to rise in another leap which landed him in the midst of the half-awakened and dazed pigs. The deadly claws were bare, and they ripped at the throat of a victim as the wicked teeth closed upon its neck and snapped the *vertebrae*. With the gush of hot blood in his face and the smell of it deluging his nostrils, caution and secrecy took wing, and the King stopped long enough to throw back his head and give one terrifying scream of victory. Then he seized the limp form before him in his powerful jaws, and with one gigantic bound cleared the barrier before him and was gone.

Almost instantly another sound went up to the listening stars; the full-throated bay

of alarm from the gaunt leader of the dog-pack. Then over the yard fence brown shadows flitted; singly and in pairs, and a score of swift feet passed hither and thither, while sniffing noses searched for the trail. They found the place of the slaughter, and the tracks of the bold marauder smelled fresh and strong. Then for a time the circling forms were baffled. But quickly one, leaner and wirier than the rest, had wriggled through the fence, and his keen-voiced, excited yelp told that the trail had been found again. Leaping, climbing, crawling, the whole pack were soon over, and with waving tails and deep-mouthed cries took up the pursuit. It was not the first time that they had followed the King of the Northern Slope, but now he was close at hand, for his tracks were hot in the soft soil of the wheat-field.

The wild-cat had barely reached the

timber line when his pursuers took up his trail in earnest. His progress across the field had been slow, for the ground was yielding, and the burden which he carried was almost half as large as himself. For a while he ran parallel to the open, husbanding his strength for greater need, then took a course up the knob-side directly opposite the way he had come and away from his lair. He heard the dog-pack after him; he heard them change their course at the timber line, and he knew that they were not to be lost by any simple ruse. The enmity of years was in their hearts and their teeth were whetted for his death. They were drawing nearer every moment, for they were fleet of foot and had nothing to hold them back. The dead weight in his vise-like teeth dragged at his neck, and as he ran the King made up his mind. He must leave his prize if he would es-

cape, for they were running two yards to his one. He stopped for the shortest instant by the side of a fallen tree, thrust his muzzle into the torn neck of his kill and drank of the blood, then, relieved of his load, he sped up the hill with long, quick bounds. His enemies were pressing him hard. He could hear them crashing through the twigs and bushes, and their short, sharp cries told him that they were straining every muscle to overtake him. No matter; they had done it before, and he was ahead of them now and still King of the Northern Slope. Nearer and nearer the top of the knob they came, and the cat redoubled his efforts, for a cunning scheme had crept into his subtle brain. He reached the crest twenty yards in advance of the closest hound, dashed across a small plateau terminating in a cliff, then swerved to the left, and was lost to sight as the pack

came panting on his heels with their noses close to earth. The lead hound went sheer over the cliff with a howl of dismay; the one immediately behind him braced his fore legs and ploughed two furrows in the leafy loam, stopping with his dripping tongue hanging over the chasm. In the momentary confusion which followed the hunted gained twenty more yards, and then the chase swept on again hotter than before. Along the crest of the range the King led them, his eyes glowing like twin headlights, and his muscles playing free and strong under his loose skin. But his strength was leaving him. The long winter fasts, together with the weight which he had carried that night for the first mile of his flight, combined to weaken that tenacious strength which was his birthright. His blood-enemies were fresh from sleep and strong from food, and their

tireless limbs were gradually overtaking him. He did not know how desperately near they were till the sharp clicking of teeth at his hind-quarters told him that the chase was nearly done. There was one alternative now — the last, and he took it. Before him rose a large oak tree. Gathering his spent energies he leaped upon it, ran half way up the trunk, then crouched on a limb with the breath rasping in his throat and a dreadful aching in his strained lungs.

It had been a long, hard race, and he was only half a victor. For beneath him was the pack, gnawing at the bark in blind frenzy, or patrolling the tree with lugubrious howls expressive of baffled hate. Throughout the long hours of the spring night they remained thus — the King a prisoner in his tower, his captors keeping sleepless guard below. All knew what

the end would be. Especially did the silent figure in the tree think on what the dawn would bring. There was no escape, but there were two deaths — the one fighting, the other to be shot down like a skulking fox or a cringing opossum. But life was sweet to the big wild-cat, and as the slow dawn broke it seemed that the balsam of the forest had never come so sweet to his nostrils, and he could feel the old-time vigor coursing through his rested limbs. He placed his bullet head on his paws, and looked down. Through the misty vapor of early morning he could see them, ten in number, keeping wide-eyed watch over him who had so long eluded their best efforts. They had been quiet towards morning, but none of them had slept. Now one lifted up his head, and sent forth his battle-call of victory. Others joined in, and just as the sun was beginning to peep

over the edge of the world the answer came — a fox-horn sounded not far away. The men-people were coming, and there were two deaths. There was no need to wait. No two-footed thing should stand laughing by and see him perish. Let the four-footed kind wreak his death; but he would not die alone.

Swiftly he raised himself and walked along the limb for a few inches. Then he lifted his back into an arch, reversed his fur so that he looked like a great brown ball, and sent forth one last, awful cry, which echoed far and wide over the knob-range and over the lowlands, causing the hate-eager hounds to involuntarily draw back in their tracks, and sending a shiver of fear to the hearts of the denizens of the southern slope. Then he launched his body in mid-air, straight at the leader of the dog-pack. The wily hound drew back,

and the wild-cat struck the earth. They were on him before he could lift his paws from the shock of the fall. Yet he shook them off bravely and gave blow for blow, and in a second the curving white claws were dripping red drops. The pack leader held off for a time, for he was old in war. But when the right moment came he rushed in for the throat-hold — and got it. Then there was a confused medley of legs, tails, teeth, claws, hair, and blood, all in a writhing heap. When order was evolved from this chaos, two hounds were dead, two limped on three legs, another had but one ear, and not one of the pack had a whole skin. And in their midst was a shapeless, lifeless ball of mottled brown.

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